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Parents as Agents of Multilingual Education:

Family Language Planning in China

Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen & Weihong WANG

Abstract

As a linguistically heterogeneous nation, China has 290 languages and nearly 2000 distinct *fangyans* (dialects or subdialects) with *Putonghua* as the national language. These languages and language varieties are hierarchically ranked, based on their wider communicative and socioeconomic values. This paper reports on how *Putonghua*, *fangyans*, and English are perceived by a group of Chinese middle-class parents and how parents as agents of language policy provide affordances and constraints in facilitating or limiting their children's language development in English, *Putonghua* and *fangyans*. The study involves eight Chinese city-dwelling families with children aged 5-11 years. By examining the children's family language audits, observing their language/literacy practices, and engaging in conversation about parental language ideologies, the study aims to understand how public discourse about different languages or *fangyans* and their perceived values shape parental involvement in their children's language development. The results of the study suggest that parents as agents of decision making have a strong influence on the changes of linguistic ecology in China in urban contexts.

KEYWORDS: parental agency; Family Language Policy; Chinese families; *fangyan*; *Putonghua*

Introduction

China is a demographically and linguistically heterogeneous country with 56 ethnic groups who speak nearly 2000 Chinese language varieties or *fangyans* (dialects/regionalects; hereafter *fangyans*) (Li, 2006). To facilitate intra- and inter-cultural communication in and outside China, both *Putonghua* (which literally means common speech) and English education have been promoted since the establishment of the new China, particularly after the implementation of the open-door policy in 1978 (Zhang, 2013). While nearly half a century's promotion has greatly improved the use of *Putonghua* and the proficiency level of English among Chinese people, it has also irreversibly transformed the linguistic landscape of China (Li & Li, 2015; Tsung, 2014). But little is known about the role families as social units play in such linguistic and cultural changes (Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2017).

This study investigates how parents as agents of language development implement their Family Language Policy (FLP). Involving eight families in China, it focuses on the agentic role parents play in creating linguistic environments for children's multilingual development. In this study, we define parental agency as the capacity of parents to make decisions about what measures should be implemented to promote or discourage the use and practice of particular languages based on their understanding of the functions and perceived values of the languages. In line with Ahearn (2001), we consider the capacity to act to be conditioned or influenced by sociocultural factors, such as macro-level policies, social realities and broader educational systems. Situated within the context of a top-down national language policy, the study aims to enhance our understanding of FLP as a non-private matter associated with broader processes of socio-political movements where parental agency "gives priority to social prestige,

educational empowerment and socioeconomic gains” (Curd-Christiansen, 2016, p. 695). As such, the study sheds light on the changing linguistic ecology shaped by external forces, macro language policy, micro family language practices, individual identity, and parental agency.

Family Language Policy and parental agency

FLP has received increasing attention in recent years because it provides a conceptual framework for investigating language changes in family domains of a given society. Viewing the family as “a key prerequisite for maintaining and preserving languages” (Schwartz & Verschik, 2013, p. 1), researchers from different geopolitical contexts have explored three core aspects of FLP - language ideology, language practices and language management (Curd-Christiansen & LaMorgia, 2018; King et al., 2008; Smith-Christmas, 2016; Spolsky, 2009). The various studies have demonstrated that FLP plays a critical role in shaping children’s linguistic and social developmental trajectories (Spolsky, 2012). Intrinsically, family language decisions are connected in significant ways with formal school education as parents are concerned with their children’s social standing in the future. The decisions, however, are often made without taking into consideration the need for maintenance of minority and indigenous languages (Curd-Christiansen, 2016; Schwartz, 2010; Moin, Schwartz & Leikin, 2013). They tend to be based broadly on parents’ evaluative perceptions of language and practices in relation to the social utility, power and value of a language in a given society.

While these evaluative ideological positions have been regarded as driving forces for FLPs, language management is the concrete linguistic measure consciously or implicitly chosen by parents to provide resistance against or submission to a minority language and cultural changes. In his classic model of language policy, Spolsky (2009) highlights the agentive role of parents as language managers of children’s language behavior. For Spolsky (p.

4), parents normally assume their roles as agents who “have or claim authority” over their children at home so that they can change or influence the children’s language practices or beliefs. As a key aspect of the management, home language environment is thus ‘controlled’ by the parents through their agentic responsibility. We argue, however, that the agentic role of parents is not a neutral phenomenon; rather it is related to how languages are constructed in social realities. As a result, what is involved in the home environment and what specific mechanisms parents use to manage their home languages need further investigation.

Curdt-Christiansen suggests to study the home environment by examining “implicit/explicit and subconscious/deliberate parental involvement and investment in providing linguistic conditions and context for language learning and literacy development” (Curdt-Christiansen, 2012, p. 57). By actively investing in children’s language development, parents not only provide explicit planned activities but also engage in implicit socialization. In this regard, they employ cultural, social and material resources to express their concerns and demonstrate a sense of agency (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013). Ren and Hu (2013), for example, studied a group of Singaporean families where they found that parental planned activities were often related to children’s language needs at school. This act of agency, however, can prevent them from providing needed resources for heritage language development. Heritage language refers to the minority language (e.g. Cantonese or Bahasa) learned by children at home, which may or may not develop fully as it is often in competition with the dominant language of the society.

More recently, Curdt-Christiansen and LaMorgia (2018) conducted a comparative study involving three ethnic communities - the Chinese, the Italian and the Urdu-speaking Pakistani - in the UK. They found that although all three groups of parents aspired to raise additive bilingual children, their active provision of linguistic environments and literacy resources varied. In fact, their parental agency for developing the respective heritage language

was undermined by the different status and social function of the three heritage languages. The Pakistani parents regarded their HL less important because of its low instrumental value and, arguably, the low esteem in which Pakistanis are usually held in the UK, and consequently they provided few literacy resources and practices for their children. In the case of the Italian and Chinese families, although HL books were abundant in both groups, the Chinese parents engaged less frequently than the Italian parents in shared reading with their children. Such practices guided by strong parental agency may reduce the richness of linguistic environments for HL development.

Parental agency has also been reflected in parents' choice of formal monolingual or bilingual education programmes for their children. Moin, Schwartz and Leikin (2013) explored factors influencing a group of Israeli immigrant parents' decision on the choice of a Russian and Hebrew bilingual preschool programme. While the parents' choice of a bilingual programme was broadly related to their conviction of its cultural and linguistic value, their agency of intention (Ahearn, 2001) was influenced by their lay theories about child language development. Unlike King and Fogle's (2006) investigation of FLP in the US where parents made references to parenting literature, scientific reports and personal experiences regarding their decisions on raising bilingual children, the parents in this study relied on their lay theories for their choices of either mono or bilingual preschools. Such lay theories include the beliefs in "the younger, the better" and in "the magic power of language environment" for language development (ibid., p. 116).

As evidenced in the brief review above, parental agency is a determining factor in the implementation of bilingual or multilingual policies in family domains. Critically, the study of parental agency highlights the importance of the *conscious choice* of the linguistic practices in shaping the *unconscious process* of linguistic and cultural transmission in transnational families. Ethnolinguistic studies provide ample evidence of how mundane, daily family

interactions are ‘unconsciously’ produced by a ‘conscious’ choice on some level (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009, 2016; Smith-Christmas, 2016). While acknowledging the role children play in the negotiation of FLP, we focus in this paper on the role of parents as agents in carrying out the observable language planning activities in their homes.

Language policy and planning in China

The promotion of Putonghua in multilingual China

In China, Han is the dominant group, constituting 91.5% of the population. The *Han* language (also known as Chinese or *Hanyu*) is, however, not a linguistically monolithic entity, but consists of nearly 2000 varieties of spoken language, united in one communal written form. For political reasons, the many different languages are perceived as one language, “the Chinese language”. Linguistically, many *fangyans* may be mutually unintelligible so that cross-dialectal communication, in many cases, is almost impossible (Li, 2006).

Putonghua has been chosen as a standard common language or *lingua franca*, widely promulgated by the central government since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. As a political decision, the promotion has been top-down and intense for the purpose of developing national unity, providing effective governance and socioeconomic development, as well as establishing a centralized educational system in the New China (Zhang, 2013).

Subsequently, *Putonghua* has become the language of instruction in all schools nationwide, the working language of government on all levels, and the language used in radio and television (Rohsenow, 2004). This intensified promotion of *Putonghua* has gradually changed the linguistic landscape from being dominated by *fangyans* to a *Putonghua* diglossic situation during the last quarter of the century, and to the current state where *Putonghua* is widely used in the entire country. While the government had no intention to “replace local

dialects with the standard language” (Li, 2006, p. 155), as evidenced from allowing dual language programmes in televisions and radios broadcast, a *Putonghua*-preferred policy has been explicitly encouraged with committed efforts throughout the years. Today, *Putonghua* has gained remarkably wider use than *fangyans* in both public/formal and private/informal domains.

The promotion of English education

The promotion of English education emerged during the 1980’s when China embarked on economic reforms. With its open-door policy to construct socialist modernisation through economic development, English was viewed as a crucial means for gaining access to modern science and technology (Shao & Gao, 2017; Wang, 2015). Over the years, the role of English evolved from simply a language for knowledge transfer to a language for communication with the West as the market-oriented economic reforms increased China’s dealings with the outside world (Pan, 2015). In recently years, English has become a language for international participation, and English education has been advanced from secondary to primary schools.

In sum, English has increasingly encroached on the educational system of China. It is estimated that the number of English learners/users in China is now exceeding 350 millions, constituting the largest population of English consumers in the world (Wei & Su, 2015). The exponential spread of English in China makes it a compelling case for an investigation of the impact of English on China. Pan (2015) point out that the heightened role of English in popular culture and as gatekeeper for educational resources and employment opportunities, form the economic and political basis for its hegemony in China.

To sum up, the promotion of both *Putonghua* and English in Chinese education has substantially changed the linguistic landscape of China which inevitably influence the everyday life of Chinese people. Nevertheless, research on language policy in China, both theoretical

and empirical, has focused on institutional or public contexts, with little attention to the intimate sphere of home domains.

The study sets out to answer three questions, centered on parents' agency in the deliberate and observable language activities planned for their children's development:

- 1) In what ways do parents as agents afford or constrain children's *fangyan* (heritage language) development as part of their multilingual repertoire?
- 2) What language ideologies influence parental agency with regard to their children's language practices and development in their three languages?
- 3) As a result of their agentive role, what observable language management efforts, such as linguistic resources and activities, are made by parents to develop their children's English?

The Study

The participating families

The study involves eight families, each with one school child. The age of the children ranges from 5 to 11 years, from level of kindergarten to Grade 6 in primary school. All families are considered middle-class, based on the parents' income level, profession and educational background. As a general characteristic, all families have lived in the city for over ten years and all owned properties in the city. The families' profile is presented in table 1.

[Insert here Table 1 Family Profiles]

The participants include three generations: grandparents (age 60-70), parents (age 38-45), and grandchildren (age 5-11). The inclusion of grandparents is important as they, which is typical

in China, often play a key role in child rearing. All grandparents, for example, came to stay with the families as soon as the children were born. The inclusion of three generations also helps us to trace the trajectory of the historical development of language policies in China. As shown in Table 1, the grandparent generation, born during the 1950s, received little higher education because they went to school during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Most of them spoke *fangyan* at home and rudimentary *Putonghua* in public. The parent generation, born in the late 1970s, went through intense *Putonghua*ification and competitive higher education. They used *fangyan* with parents at home, *fangyan* and *Putonghua* with friends during their primary and secondary education, and *Putonghua* at the university. The third generation is educated exclusively in *Putonghua* and has been exposed to English since early age because of the new English education policies.

The city has a large flow of migrants. This sociolinguistic characteristic is also reflected by the participating families. Of the eight families, three (families 4, 6 and 7) are locals, and the other five are migrants who have settled down in the city for their professional advancement. In this regard, the *fangyans* spoken by the families are not exclusively the local dialect of the city (hereafter *the city dialect*), but a variety of dialects (12 in total) from different regions (hereafter *hometown fangyans*). The migrant families, including the parent generation, do not speak the *local dialect*.

With regard to English, all parents had a certain degree of English proficiency though none used it in their everyday communication. All parents were university graduates and had received formal English education from at least secondary school to university. Among them, four mothers and two fathers were university lecturers. As to the children's generation, although all were born in the city, only Ding (F4) could speak the *city dialect*, and Ei (F5) and Fang (F6) could understand it to a degree. The rest could speak neither the *city dialect* nor any

hometown fangyans of their heritage. While their everyday language was predominantly *Putonghua*, all have had some contact with English since their pre-school time.

Data collection

The study is an ethnographic-oriented research in which families are recruited through convenient sampling. Our basic criteria were families who use both *fangyan* and *Putonghua* in their daily communication, and who also provide English language learning opportunities for their children. Through colleagues and friends, we approached seven families who enrolled their children in a university-affiliated primary school. Explaining the purposes of the study, we asked if they were willing to share their experiences of raising multilingual children. Four families (F1-F4) accepted our invitation and gave consent to participate in the study. To reduce bias from having families from similar backgrounds, we recruited another four families whose children studied in a neighborhood primary school (F5-F8).

Tools of inquiry:

Data were collected from November 2016 to July 2017 through the following measures:

1) Interviews (13 hours): six mothers and two fathers were interviewed to gain information on the families' background, children's language environment and practices, and family members' language attitudes and language management activities (see interview questions in appendix). The first-round interviews were conducted in either *Putonghua* or *fangyan* as chosen by the participants and lasted one hour. Follow-up interviews with all available family members were undertaken on family visits (see next section) to further clarify the language practices observed and recorded in their everyday activities.

2) Family talk recordings (21 hours): In order to reduce the observational intrusion and to capture language management activities engaged by parents, each family was asked to record

at least two representative family interactions among family members monthly. Recordings used either the parents' iPhones or iPad to capture either family talk during dinner time, homework session, or language learning activities, unstructured play or TV time.

3) Home visits and observational field notes (48 pages): home visits were arranged with families once per month for five months (Dec 2016-May 2017) at their convenience to observe their language practices and children's language-study related activities. During home visits, language resources and activities were observed and detailed notes were taken to understand the children's home language environment.

4) Collection of material artefacts: in order to contextualise the children's language and literacy practices, we collected curriculum documents (2), photos capturing children's activities (69), children's textbooks (6 sets), and other reading materials (46 pictures).

The multiple sets of data were triangulated to understand parental ideologies and their family language practices. The triangulation validates particularly our rich data by cross verifying the interview data and observational data.

Data analysis

Data analysis is guided by both our theoretical framework deductively and by looking for emerging themes from the data inductively (Braun & Clark, 2006). Initial coding was deductively guided by the three interrelated components of family language policy – ideology, practices and management. Following that, we read transcripts of the initially theory- driven coded data, and generated new categories based on the emerging themes. Table 2 shows the thematic topics we coded based on the interviews, recordings, observations and language resources.

[insert table 2 here – Thematic Coding]

As illustrated in table 2, we organised the themes based on the relevance of the three languages and the use patterns in the lives of the family members: *fangyan*, *Putonghua* and English. With regard to *fangyan*, we focus on its use in the ‘natural environment’; in respect to *Putonghua*, we emphasise its high status, and its functions for wider communication and as identity for the younger generation; regarding English, we pay attention to the linguistic resources at the children’s disposal.

The Findings

In this section, we present our findings according to the noticeable common aspects of each language reflected through ideologies explicitly articulated by the parents, language interactions *unconsciously* practiced by family members, and language resources provided by parents to facilitate children’s language learning. To understand the agentive role of the parents, we discuss each language separately, according to its status and functions.

Fangyan: a language that lacks a natural environment?

Generally speaking, all families used *fangyan* to some degree in their homes. As illustrated in table 1, all grandparents used their respective *fangyans* in their lives as they had basic education and lived most of their lives in their hometowns. Although they were able to understand *Putonghua*, none of them used it neither in formal nor informal contexts. This linguistic habit had accompanied them into the lives of their children and grandchildren, as expressed by Mrs. Cheng (F3): (Res = researcher; Mrs. Cheng = F3 mother) (although all interviews were conducted in *Putonghua* or *fangyan*, we present only the first dialogue in Chinese script with a translation, the subsequent dialogues are presented only in translation).

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Res: | 所以他小时候生下来爷爷奶奶带他就说这个方言？爷爷奶奶说普通话吗？ | So it was grandpa and grandma who helped with taking care of him in <i>fangyan</i> when he [the son: Cheng] was born? Can grandpa and grandma speak <i>Putonghua</i> ? |
| Mrs. Cheng: | 不会说普通话, 完全不会说普通话。 | No, they can’t, can’t speak <i>Putonghua</i> at all. |

Res:	他(们)有没有试图憋过普通话?	Have they ever tried speaking <i>Putonghua</i> ?
Mrs. Cheng:	没有。	No.
Res:	就说方言?	Just speak <i>fangyan</i> ?
Mrs. Cheng:他们基本上, 包括直到今天他们也说方言。 in general, up until now, they still speak <i>fangyan</i> .

(Interview Mrs. Cheng, 22/01/17)

For many grandparents, *fangyan* was the only language they knew until they were invited by their children to join the childcare force. Undeniably, *fangyan* was also a language of emotion, culture, and identity for the parent generation. The following conversation with Mr. Ang (F1) reveals how important *fangyan* is in their lives.

Mr. Ang:	We speak hometown language in inner Mongolia.
Res:	[You] also spoke inner Mongolian in schools?
Mr. Ang:	Teachers in class also spoke hometown language, <i>fangyan</i> .
Res:	Then, when was <i>Putonghua</i> used?
Mr. Ang:	(in) Language Arts classes, when teacher read aloud texts, then <i>Putonghua</i> was used.
Res:	So, in class <i>Putonghua</i> was used, <i>fangyan</i> was used for everyday communication?
Mr. Ang:	Yes, [but] teachers also used <i>fangyan</i> in many subject classes such as chemistry, physics.

(Interview Mr. Ang, 21/01/17)

In framing the position of *fangyan* for the parent generation, Mr. Ang elaborated the functions of *fangyan* in both informal and formal contexts. The environment for using the *fangyan* was then much broader than it is today.

While all children had much exposure to their respective *fangyan*, they were neither encouraged nor forbidden to use it in everyday communication. For some parents, discontinuity of *fangyan* in home domains was due to the lack of linguistic environment as illustrated by Mr. Dong (F4).

Res:	Have you thought about teaching him [son] the local <i>fangyan</i> ? Or influence him to learn the local language?
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Mr. Dong:	Yes, I have. But I feel, as far as languages are concerned, if you wanted to learn a language, there are two ways, the first is the (immersed) <u>environment</u> . The second is to systematically study it. In our home, I speak relatively <u>less local <i>fangyan</i> with him [son]</u> . Put it this way, it is impossible to speak <i>fangyan</i> all the time. For example, if he asks me, “how should I
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decode this vocabulary, daddy?” I can’t tell him that in the local *fangyan*, right? Neither can I do it in the local *fangyan* when helping him with dictation (emphases added by authors)

(Interview Mr. Dong, 81/01/17)

In building his argument for not speaking much *fangyan* with his son, Mr. Dong positioned his stance as lack of environment for using the language. He believed that doing school work, such as dictation and learning new vocabularies, had to be carried out in *Putonghua*. In this respect, he implied that *fangyan* was under-developed and parochial without adequate vocabularies to deal with aspects of formal literacy practices and school education. A similar position was held by other parents. When asked why her home *fangyan* was not intentionally used as a socialization means, Mrs. Huang (F8) said,

Mrs. Huang: Well, I know there isn’t an environment for him [to use it], he [son] would definitely not be able to learn it, so how could I have any expectations, right?...

Because if you want him to learn it deliberately, for him, it would be a kind of, how should I put it, extra curriculum. It would become a burden.

(Interview Mrs. Huang, 31/05/17)

In this narrative, the word “environment” surfaced again. Mrs Huang held little expectation for her son’s *fangyan* development as a result of ‘there isn’t an environment for him’. She also believed that learning the language would be “a burden.” While being aware that a rich linguistic environment is important for language learning, both Mrs. Huang and Mr Dong acted upon the situation by denying responsibility for creating an “environment”, thus revealing a sense of powerlessness and lack of ‘agency’ to provide the “environment” for their children, leading to discontinuity of *fangyan* in home domains and discontinuity of intergenerational communication.

The apparent ‘lack of agency’, however, is a social construction of demo-geo-graphic reality, based on *fangyan*’s restricted locality, not on its cultural and emotional qualities. Mrs. Ang (F1) pointed out,

My hometown *fangyan* is not very useful. You see, I was born and grew up in Jiangxi province. The *fangyans* used in Jiangxi are quite diverse. Sometimes, a *fangyan* used in one village could not be understood by villagers in the neighboring village. Like the *fangyan* of my village, if I could only speak my village *fangyan*, I could hardly communicate with the Hakka speakers in the neighboring village. ... all those who are working outside, like me, switch to *Putonghua*. They only use the *fangyan* back at home. To teach my daughter a *fangyan* with such limited usage, I don't think it is wise.

(Interview Mrs. Ang, 21/01/2017)

As revealed in Mrs. Ang's justification, *fangyan* has "limited usage" which would not provide its speakers with any wider communication possibilities and it could even potentially restrict their mobility. The perception of *fangyan* as restricted and limited was closely linked to "local people" who had little opportunity to move outside of villages, thus, giving it a sense of backwardness.

These ideologies, in turn, acted as an agentive intention to underpin parents' management of their children's *fangyan* development. All eight sets of parents held the position that *fangyan* was not essential for their children. Although grandparents could provide rich environments for children to acquire their *fangyan* effortlessly, the parents did not take such opportunities to further their children's language development, as revealed in *Excerpt 1* from Family 2. (G = grandma; B = Baobei, Mrs B = the mother)

Excerpt 1: What shall we have for dinner?

G: (in her hometown *fangyan*) How about we have steamed fish this evening, Baobei?

We have not had fish for a long time.

B: (No response).

Mrs B: (in *Putonghua*) Hi, Baobei. Grandma is asking what to have for dinner. How about steamed fish?

B: (in *Putonghua*) No fish. Too many bones.

Mrs B: (in *fangyan*) He does not want fish. Let's buy some spiced beef directly from the market.

It is convenient and quick.

G: (in *fangyan*) Ok. If you like beef, let's have beef again this evening.

(Home interaction of F2, 18/12/16)

In this dialogue, Grandma initiated the interaction in *fangyan*, but her initiation was not responded by Baobei, the grandson. The mother (Mrs. Bing) repeated grandma's question in *Putonghua* and this time, Baobei gave an answer specifying that he did not want fish for dinner in *Putonghua*. Instead of asking Baobei to reply grandma in *fangyan*, Mrs. Bing translated Baobei's reply in *fangyan*. This interaction shows different communication patterns between Mrs. Bing and the grandparents, and Mrs. Bing and her son. In seven out of eight families, it was observed that parents used *fangyan* in parent-grandparent interaction, but switched to *Putonghua* in parent-child interaction. Such communication patterns indicate a strong parental agency tied to their decision to engage in (not) using *fangyan* in family conversations. In these communication exchanges, language shift is clearly "talking into being" – a phenomenon that Gafaranga (2010) also observed in the Rwanda community in Belgium. The difference between Gafaranga's and our context is the agentive role played by children and parents. While in his case the children requested adults to "medium switch" from Kinyarwanda to French, in our case it was the parents who acted as the agents mediating the shift from *fangyan* to *Putonghua* between grandparents and children. The patterns indicate an ideologically informed attitude toward *fangyan*, as articulated by the parents from the previous illustrated interviews. In their agentive management plan, it is clear that *Putonghua* is the first and sometimes only language of daily communication at home.

Putonghua: "Putonghua is their mother tongue"

Over the past decades, *Putonghua* has become the *de facto* lingua franca in China. Today it is used on a wide range of local-global, formal-informal, official and non-official occasions in

peoples' work, study and social interactions. This prestige is recognized by all families acknowledging three general functions of *Putonghua* in their lives: 1) wider communication and mobility; 2) versatility; and 3) identity and cultural marker.

Regarding *Putonghua*'s function, all parents agreed that it is essential to learn it well in order to be able to communicate with people all over China. Mrs. Gao (F7) provided the following explanations:

Mrs Gao: ...Regarding communication, then language is a tool, that's why it has to be a common [tool]? You know, it's given that for Chinese, the highest ranked language is definitely *Putonghua*.

Res: Why?

Mrs Gao: Why among Chinese language, *hanyu* has to be learned well. Because you are in China, in the broader environment [of China], if you don't speak *Putonghua* well, it would be very difficult for you to communicate with people. If you can't speak *fangyan* well, I think it won't be that difficult. But if your *Putonghua* is bad, then you are in trouble.

(Interview Mrs. Gao, 17/05/17)

The display of agency is clearly evidenced in this narrative by notion of what "counts" as a communication tool. Linking language to communication leads to a stigmatisation of *fangyan* as less useful resulting in the current *Putonghua* practices in China.

Such perceptive agency leads to another function of *Putonghua* as more versatile. Mr. Ang (F1) noted that using *Putonghua* is "more effective in satisfying our various communication needs than *fangyan*" (Interview, 21/01/2017). Mr. Dong (F4) further elaborated that;

My educational framework is to follow its natural path. So, *Putonghua* is used in kindergarten, then [my son learned *Putonghua*. Anyway, *Putonghua* is certainly the main communication language in this country, (we should) learn both languages [*fangyan* and *Putonghua*]. Or rather, (there is) no need to learn either languages, because you live in this environment, you acquire it naturally. The kid likes to watch TV, the language in the TV programmes is *Putonghua*, so he learns to speak *Putonghua*...

From a future perspective, *Putonghua* would be much more suitable for the younger generation's future advancement. He may choose to work somewhere else (other than here), or study somewhere

else, if there are possibilities that he may consider [to travel outside the city], it's best that he should use more *Putonghua*.

(Interview Mr. Dong, 11/05/17)

Mr. Dong confirmed *Putonghua*'s versatility by its use in various domains, such as schools, media entertainment, work and further education. Although he acknowledged that both *Putonghua* and *fangyan* can be learned in a natural environment, his construction of agency was established by his explicit beliefs that "*Putonghua* would be much more suitable for the younger generation's future advancement". While his beliefs about language learning seemed to be derived from Darwin's "natural selection" theory, this conviction does not take into consideration the seemingly "natural linguistic environment" that is driven by ideological positions, social preferences and economic advantages. In other words, *fangyan* and *Putonghua* were perceived hierarchically, based on their functional values but not on their symbolic and emotional values for intergenerational transmission, which have been identified in other contexts (Smith-Christmas, 2016).

The third function of *Putonghua*, recognised by both parents and children, was that of the identity and cultural markers. This is illustrated by Mrs. Huang (F8),

Nowadays, many children are born to be *Putonghua* speakers. They use *Putonghua* at school, at home and for all other social activities. *Putonghua* is their mother tongue. This phenomenon is now quite common in many cities in China. It is an unavoidable result of mass migration... Internationally, it is still *Putonghua* that acts as the carrier of Chinese language and culture. That is why we teach international students *Putonghua* instead of *fangyan*. For our children who are to be nationally and even internationally mobile in the future, *Putonghua* is more appropriate than dialects as the carrier of their identities.

(Interview Mrs. Huang, 31/05/17)

Mrs. Huang revealed that she was willing to accept *Putonghua* as the identity marker of her son because of its widespread use in recent years. This acceptance suggests that migration not only moves people around when seeking better professional opportunities, but also makes people seek new identities as they adopt new cultures and use *Putonghua* increasingly. In her

agentive stance, Mrs. Huang also brought *Putonghua* from the local level as a language of intercommunication to a national level that linked with national identity. *Putonghua*, for her and many other parents, as a marker of unified Chinese identity, is embodied in the contrastive concepts of national versus international. Although reflecting the ideology of “one nation, one language, and one identity”, such a self-claimed identity and agentive act to sociocultural and sociolinguistic changes is particularly beneficial and practical when children in the future move away from the local city to other parts of the country and abroad.

With such guiding language ideologies, most parents tried, as their top priority and in their agentive management role in their FLP, to develop children’s *Putonghua*. To make sure their children could speak *Putonghua* confidently and properly, the parents of all families enacted their FLP by speaking *Putonghua* with their children from birth. Their agentive agenda was clear to “make sure that the most important language be learnt first. Only after we were convinced that she [the child] has no problems with speaking *Putonghua*, would we engage her with learning *fangyan* if she is interested” (Interview Mr. En, F5, 08/01/17).

To sum up, as the agent of language management planning, all parents managed to raise their children in *Putonghua* by prioritising it over *fangyan* because of the higher value and wider utility of *Putonghua* in China.

English: A language for the future

The global spread of English as a lingua franca enjoys an extremely high level of popularity in the world today, and China is no exception. The parents involved in the study have all demonstrated their agency by making conscious decisions and planning for their children to develop English. The sense of agency is partly derived from the parents’ desire to provide their children with better professional advantages, and partly from the educational requirements, as

English is a compulsory subject for examination in primary, secondary and higher education, thus a gate-keeper for children's education opportunities.

Parental agency is also displayed in the form of aspirations. This includes parental expectations for their children's future education. Mr. Dong (F4) clarified his view in the following:

I think English is the future, like the society is open more and more, and China is going toward the world, so the use of English will be broader and broader. I truly feel English is very useful. Who knows? if our financial situation is better in the future, we might want him to study abroad, to go to universities abroad.

(Interview Mr. Dong, 05/11/17)

Sending the children to study abroad was not only Mr. Dong's aspiration. All families expected that their children would become global citizens through the language of English. In their view, if *Putonghua* was a must for the children, English was no doubt "an extra pair of wings" for them (Interview Mrs. Bing, 01/12/17).

Framing their aspirations on what English could bring about in terms of professional opportunity, educational possibility and international social mobility, the parents actively invested in the study of English. In table 3, we present the various activities in which the parents engaged their children to learn English.

[Insert here Table 3: English learning activities of the eight families]

As shown in Table 3, all eight families have exposed their children to English before they attended primary school. This phenomenon has also been reported by other scholars (Jin et al., 2016; Pan, 2015). Jin et al., (2016) reported that English was perceived by parents as "a recognized ability and skill capacity to help ensure a child's future" (p. 3). As a result, parents not only have strong positive attitudes toward their children's English learning, they are also willing to provide financial support for their children's English education through private

English classes, either in after-school programmes or weekend classes. According to the parents' report, all children except Ding (F4) attended some type of extra tuition in English. Aimei (F1) and Fang (F6)'s parents have hired native English speakers to practise English with them in order for them not to lose the English they have acquired during a one year stay in the US.

The parental agency is also demonstrated in the English learning resources and various forms of language learning activities. Table 4 illustrates the types of resources provided by the parents.

[Insert here Table 4: English resources for children in the families]

These deliberate planning activities illustrate again the perceived value that parents ascribe to English. The private tuition trainings and the abundant learning resources point to strong parental agency and commitments to their children's English education. There are two noticeable features regarding the rich resources available to the children: software/internet programmes; and communicative approach to learning English.

Among the multiple learning materials, digital resources were used by all families. The majority were recommended by the English training centers attended by the children (F2-F8). Aimei (F1) employed a variety of software programmes, downloaded by her parents through Google and YouTube. In addition to the many hard copies and digital copies of children's books she owned, she also used *qupeiyin* (voice matching software) to practise oral English by mimicking a character in a film or cartoon. The various forms of digital intervention have taken over traditional grammar exercises with pen and paper that many of the parents experienced, which indicates that parents are committed to making English education enjoyable for their children. The agentic management endeavor, however, is in stark contrast to the 'lack of

agency' attitude and non-interfering *laissez-faire* policy on *fangyan*. Such difference in management measures for English and *fangyan* demonstrates strong parental agentive role in providing linguistic conditions for the education of the next global generation .

Discussion

This study explores how a group of Chinese middle-class parents construct their agency in implementing family language policies for three different languages in their everyday lives: *fangyan*, *Putonghua*, and English. Through our ethnolinguistic observations, we have seen ways in which multilingualism is manifested in home domains. The language practices in these families featured three interrelated characteristics: 1) the cultural/emotional detachment from *fangyan*; 2) that languages were hierarchically ordered; and 3) that strong language management measures were implemented.

1) The cultural/emotional attachment to the minority language, *fangyan*, was absent in parental discourse. This contrasts with other research on minority language shift, where tensions exist between parental desires to maintain heritage languages for cultural/emotional purposes and the practical reality of linguistic capital of mainstream languages in a given society (Smith-Christmas, 2016; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; 2016). Despite the adults' best intentions to maintain heritage languages, tensions between minority languages as having cultural functions vs mainstream language as having instrumental and political values are difficult to resolve (Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). The cultural and emotional detachment from *fangyan* may be explained by the rise of English as it pushes *fangyun* out of the home language/majority language diglossic dynamics. It may also be explained by the significant educational and practical values of *Putonghua* and English in the current educational system. This leads to the discussion of the next characteristics.

2) Our study shows that linguistic hierarchy is a strong factor influencing parental agency regarding which languages they want to develop and which languages they want to let go. In the process of implementing FLP, parents either claimed their responsibility or assumed ‘lack of power’ to create language environments for their children’s multilingual development. As Ahearn (2001, 112) points out, agency is “the sociocultural mediated capacity to act”, so the parental act was highly linked to the sociocultural values of the three languages constructed in social realities and ideologies. While agency can be a force for social transformation and change, we argue that it can also be a form of linguistic or cultural reproduction. Our study demonstrates that in their ‘capacity to act’, parents complied with the societal ideology about the differentiated functional values of the three languages, thus contributing to the reproduction of language hierarchy. In this case, the discontinued practices of *fangyan* was viewed as inconsequential, despite the breakdown in intergenerational communication. With regard to *Putonghua*, the agentive role was demonstrated by their compliance and participation to support the promotion of *Putonghua* as the language of instruction, the language of national identity and the language of wider communication. Their facilitative agency (Fogle, 2012) was particularly reflected in their strongly-held views on the instrumental value of the English language as a strong marketable ‘commodity’ that provides future opportunities for studying abroad and a competitive edge for obtaining high-paid jobs.

3) Language management is another strong feature in this study. As evidenced by our data, parental agency was reflected through their strong aspirations for their children’s future. They firmly believed that they were responsible for and capable of providing linguistic conditions and creating possibilities when educating their children in English. These “impact beliefs” (De Houwer, 1999) were subsequently “acted out” in actual management efforts to develop the children’s English language skills where abundant resources and materials as well as extra tuitions were provided. Previous studies have examined home language and

literacy practices as an act of agency by parents to manage multiple language learning in Western countries where Chinese parents have been reported to adhere to certain cultural values, such as high aspirations for education and high expectations for academic success (Curdt-Christiansen & LaMorgia, 2018; Gates & Guo, 2014; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Our study indicates that the strong proactive parental agency is also related to deeply rooted cultural beliefs about education. In this case it is illustrated by the parents' efforts to meet the demands of the public educational system.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to children's multilingual development by synergising the study of family language policy with the theory of agency. In this exploration, we illustrate how language management is an act of agency in facilitating or constraining children's development in multiple languages through parents' conscious choices in input provision. As a general result, our case demonstrates that parents hold very similar views about the different values of languages involved in their daily lives. These similar beliefs, in turn, become fuel that forms or strengthens an ideology which perpetuates language functions and values in a given society. Our study also shows that the language learning resources and various forms of language learning activities can provide a transformative linguistic environment that may lead to different types of language outcome in children and even have life-changing consequences. In particular, with regard to *fangyan* as a heritage language, to discontinue using it will have detrimental effects on several dimensions of our society, including the loss of sentimental/emotional connections in intergenerational relations, and the loss of cultures, as well as linguistic and cultural diversity.

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